



LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION

e-ISSN: 1474-8479

Journal homepage:

<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/pages/london-review-of-education>

Book review: *Social Equality in Education: France and England 1789–1939*, by Ann Margaret Doyle

Vincent Carpentier 

How to cite this article

Carpentier, V. (2020) 'Book review: *Social Equality in Education: France and England 1789–1939*, by Ann Margaret Doyle'. *London Review of Education*, 18 (2): 313–314. <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.18.2.12>

Submission date: 6 December 2019

Acceptance date: 13 January 2020

Publication date: 21 July 2020

Peer review

This article has been through editorial review.

Copyright

© 2020 Carpentier. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Open access

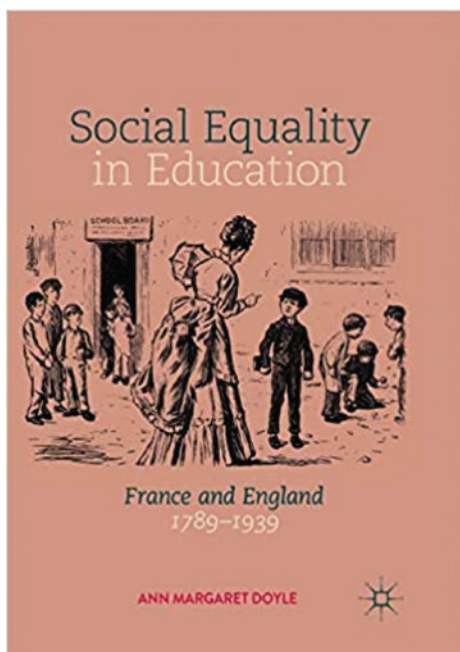
London Review of Education is a peer-reviewed Open Access journal.

Book review

Vincent Carpentier* – *UCL Institute of Education, UK*

Social Equality in Education: France and England 1789–1939, by Ann Margaret Doyle

London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2018; 245 pp.; ISBNs: 978-3-31994-720-4 (hbk); 978-3-03006-906-3 (pbk); 978-3-31994-721-1 (ebk)



Ann Margaret Doyle's book offers a timely and original contribution to the understanding of the relationship between (in)equality and education in France and England. The book is a very fine example of the potential of comparative historical sociology. The author provides a well-crafted account of that methodology back to its creation in 1843 by John Stuart Mill. The research uses the macrocausal method in order to compare and contrast the relationship between the promotion of social equality and education in France and England between 1789 and 1939.

The analysis is based on the test of three interrelated hypotheses to characterize the strength and shape of that relationship in each country. The first hypothesis relates to the persistence of ideology. Republicanism is considered as the shift from liberal monarchy to pure democracy during the French Revolution, and the platform for the emergence of social equality and secularism as key principles of educational policies. In England, the prevalent ideology is connected to the Industrial Revolution and the liberal principles of political economy of *laissez-faire* favouring the idea of freedom over equality, including in education. The second hypothesis is social class alliance involving the bourgeoisie, peasantry and lower middle class in France, and the landed upper class and upper middle class in England. These alliances respectively explain the early

emergence of a meritocratic (at least in principle) access to secondary education in France symbolized by the Baccalauréat, and the development of a more stratified system in England. The third hypothesis, which relates to the nature of the state, explains the distinctive organizations of educational systems in both countries, heavily centralized in France and driven by a mix of local and voluntary schools in England. Taken together, the three hypotheses, which are of course interrelated, are effective in making the reader reflect on the connections and tensions between the principles and practices of equality in education. The cases of France and England are very relevant and illustrative. These cases show the centrality of social equality in explaining the early progress of the French system compared to an English system that remained highly stratified around social class. At the same time, the book rightly identifies some substantial gaps between the principles and practices of the French republican meritocracy revealed by the lacks in social mobility, persistent to this day. Thus, the book delivers on its promise to test these hypotheses, while at the same time providing a clear historical contextualization of the development of the educational systems in both countries.

Doyle is tactful in connecting past, present and future. She has carefully chosen to let the reader reflect on what her study and framework might mean today. She offers her own interpretation of today's issues in the last chapter, which is independent from the rest of the book. The decision to explore education through the lens of social equality for the period 1789–1939 is welcome for several reasons. First, the lens of social equality is very timely. We are still experiencing the aftermath of the 2008 great recession, which has revealed the levels of inequality characterizing and endangering our socio-economic fabric. The reactions to the crisis have further increased these inequalities, with devastating economic, social and political effects, making a reflection on social equality and education more important than ever.

Second, the focus on the period 1789–1939 is very fruitful because it examines the cultural, social, economic and political factors that were key in shaping the various national versions of the welfare states after the Second World War. The constructions of these models in England and France, and their influence on educational development, shared some important similarities but were also distinctive. One of the key contributions of this book is to make us reflect on those distinctions at the intersection of the three hypotheses of prevalent ideology, social class alliances and the role of the state. The framework also makes us reflect on the period that followed the 1973 crisis and its impact on the welfare states since the 1980s. The three lenses are useful to show that comprehensive education was challenged by the crisis in both countries but in different ways. Both the acceleration of the marketization agenda in England and the increasing tensions between the rhetoric and reality of the meritocratic republican ideal are increasingly problematic. This means that we are probably at a turning point when both countries will have to rethink and reshape their relationship between social equality and education. This book contributes to offer a historical lens to this challenging task. My own answer using Doyle's hypotheses is that the imperative to ensure that education promotes social equality requires a new alliance drawing a social contract recognizing the necessity of a sustained public investment in education.